

Sustaining Jail Diversion Efforts: The Lancaster County (NE) Mental Health Jail Diversion Program

Lancaster County (Lincoln), Nebraska began mental health jail diversion programming in 2003 through a Targeted Capacity Expansion grant funded by the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Within the first year of funding, staff with the Lancaster County Mental Health Jail Diversion Project (LCMHJDP) began to focus their attention on identifying ways to sustain the project beyond the 3-year grant period.

Project staff realized that two key elements were necessary for sustainability to become a reality for the LCMHJDP. First, outcomes from the extensive research conducted by both the program and evaluation staff would have to be favorable and demonstrate that jail diversion actually works for Lancaster County and its residents (both consumers and tax payers). Second, staff of the LCMHJDP were aware that a great deal of education and advocacy would have to occur with local partner treatment agencies, as well as with elected government officials at both the county and state levels.

During Years One and Two of the LCMHJDP, staff have engaged in a variety of sustainability efforts. These have included:

- Bi-annual data meetings with the Lancaster County Board of Commissioners;
- Community workshops and trainings focusing on mental health jail diversion;
- Community focus groups with consumers and stakeholders;
- Individual meetings with Nebraska state senators who are members of the Appropriations and Health and Human Services committees;
- Making use of technical assistance from the TAPA Center for Jail Diversion to support a site visit of the jail diversion program in Portland, Maine for the LCMHJDP Director and the Lancaster County Board of Commissioners' chair and vice-chair. This visit helped to illustrate the value of jail diversion within a similar-sized jurisdiction in a different area of the United States.

The LCMHJDP's Peer Specialist, Ms. Pat Talbott, has proven to be an invaluable resource for making contacts and arranging face-to-face meetings with local and state elected officials.

While all of these efforts have proven successful, none have had the impact achieved by the visit of CMHS Director A. Kathryn Power to Lincoln, Nebraska on Monday, January 23, 2006. Director Power graciously agreed to come to Nebraska to raise awareness of two critical issues: mental health jail diversion and mental health system reform.

The day's events began early at the Nebraska State Capitol. Director Power was introduced by Senator Jim Jensen, chair of Nebraska's Health and Human Services committee. From there, Director Power delivered a powerful speech to Nebraska's Lieutenant Governor, state senators, senators' staff members, Nebraska's Behavioral Health Administrator, consumers and the media. Her comments emphasized the importance of deliberate and intelligent behavioral health reform, and cited the importance of including funded jail diversion programs in any transformation efforts. .

Director Power's second speaking engagement reached approximately 250 consumers, behavioral health providers, law enforcement and corrections officials, members of the media and elected officials from throughout the state of Nebraska. After an introduction from Lieutenant Governor Rick Sheehy, Director Power again delivered a powerful message to her audience. At both engagements, Director Power was followed by a consumer of the LCMHJDP, who spoke about the need to sustain existing jail diversion programs. The value of these programs can not be overestimated; as this individual told the Lincoln Journal Star the following day, "jail diversion saved my life."

When the day was completed, elected county and state officials, Nebraska's Behavioral Health Administrator, as well as the Lieutenant Governor had committed to a follow-up meeting to address ways to fund Lancaster County's existing jail diversion program and to create jail diversion programs in other areas of the state. In addition to the article mentioned above, Director Power's visit captured the lead story on the nightly news in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Director Power and the LCMHJDP participant delivered messages that struck a chord with many Nebraskans. The impact of their words and experiences is certain to linger for months and years to come. Hopefully, as a result, many other Nebraskans will have a chance to have their lives positively impacted by jail diversion programs.